The Last Leaf

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF O. HENRY

William Sydney Porter spent his childhood in North Carolina, where he read voraciously and attended his aunt's elementary school. His uncle trained him to become a pharmacist at nineteen. At twenty, he moved to Texas, where he held various jobs—as a rancher, bank teller, draftsman, and journalist—all while writing on the side. Sometime after his first marriage to Athol Estes, he began writing for the *Houston Post*, but he was arrested shortly afterwards for embezzling funds at his previous bank position. He escaped to Honduras, but returned to the United States when he learned that Estes had died from tuberculosis. Porter spent the next three years in prison, where he wrote and published under various pseudonyms, the most popular one being "O. Henry." After his release from prison, Porter moved to New York City, where he wrote most of his short stories. He died in 1910, at age forty-seven, from complications that likely arose from his drinking.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In the early twentieth century, New York experienced rapid population growth, in part due to an influx of European immigrants to the United States (like Mr. Behrman). "The Last Leaf" is set in the New York neighborhood of Greenwich Village, which became a diverse and vibrant community of artists. However, as the story shows, urbanization and overcrowding also led to poor living conditions, which in turn led to a high rate of sickness and disease. The early 20th century was also a time of upheaval in the art world, as artists began moving away from realism (like Behrman's illusionist painting of the leaf) and towards more experimental styles, such as Cubism, Futurism, and Fauvism. As such, "The Last Leaf" is set on the precipice of a radical change in the art world, in the last moment in which an illusionistic painting of a leaf might have been considered a masterpiece.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

O. Henry wrote hundreds of short stories, many of which are famous for their surprise endings. Other well-known stories include "The Gift of the Magi" and "The Cop and the Anthem." Like "The Last Leaf," "The Cop and the Anthem" ends with an ironic twist of fate for its protagonist: after making many attempts at getting arrested, a homeless man in New York City is finally arrested without trying as he loiters outside a church, just when he had been inspired to turn his life around. In "The Gift of the Magi," a wife cuts her beautiful, long hair and sells it so she can buy her husband a chain for his watch for Christmas. Meanwhile, the husband sells his watch to buy a comb for his wife's hair. Like "The Last Leaf," "The Gift of the Magi" is concerned with themes of love and sacrifice. O. Henry's short stories also often draw attention to social issues such as poverty and homelessness, the role of women in society, the compensation of artists, and the problems and advantages of urban life. In this sense, his work has much in common with other works published between 1900 and 1910, such as W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), a meditation on the African-American experience in the United States, and Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906), which exposed poor conditions for immigrant workers in American factories.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Last Leaf
- **When Written:** 1907
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 1907
- **Literary Period:** American literature, early 20th century
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** New York City, Greenwich Village, early 1900s
- **Climax:** Sue reveals that the last leaf on the vine is actually an illusionistic painting meant to restore Johnsy's hope
- **Antagonist:** Hopelessness
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

"Banana Republic." O. Henry coined the phrase "banana republic" to describe a small country with an economy dependent upon the export of a single product (such as bananas). The term, which first appeared in his book *Cabbages and Kings* (1904), is still widely used today.

O. Henry on Film. There have been more than two dozen cinematic adaptions of short stories by O. Henry since the invention of film technology, including an adaptation of "The Last Leaf" produced by the Church of Latter-Day Saints.

PLOT SUMMARY

"The Last Leaf" takes place in Greenwich Village, a bohemian neighborhood in New York City, sometime in the early 20th century. The story centers on Sue and Johnsy, two young women artists who share a studio at the top of a run-down apartment building. When winter comes, Johnsy becomes grievously ill with a case of pneumonia. The doctor who visits

them predicts that Johnsy won't have much chance of survival if she doesn't find the will to live, since his medicines have little effect on a patient who has decided that she's going to die. When the doctor asks if Johnsy is depressed about something in particular, Sue mentions Johnsy's unfulfilled ambition to paint the Bay of Naples, but the doctor is dismissive and asks if Johnsy is troubled over a man.

An increasingly fatalistic Johnsy becomes obsessed with the leaves falling from a vine outside her window. After the **last leaf** falls, she tells Sue, she will die. Sue works on an illustration for a magazine (which she plans to sell to buy more food for Johnsy) and tries unsuccessfully to convince Johnsy that she has something to live for. Sue goes to visit their downstairs neighbor, Behrman—an old, unsuccessful artist who, after decades of failure, still hopes to paint his "masterpiece." When he hears about Johnsy's illness and her obsession with the leaves outside her window, he is initially contemptuous of the idea that leaves could have anything to do with Johnsy's health.

Ultimately, however, Behrman stays out all night in a violent storm to paint a realistic-looking leaf onto the wall outside Sue and Johnsy's window. Seeing that the "last leaf"—which is in fact Behrman's painting—has seemingly survived the storm two nights in a row, Johnsy takes hope and begins to recover. However, Behrman catches pneumonia from exposure to the rain and cold, and dies a few days later. When Sue tells Johnsy this, she remarks that Behrman had finally painted his "masterpiece."

CHARACTERS

Joanna ("Johnsy") – A young artist from California. She lives with Sue in a studio apartment in Greenwich Village and has long dreamed of visiting Italy to paint the Bay of Naples. She falls seriously ill with pneumonia and becomes convinced that she will die when the **last leaf** falls from the vine outside her window. The doctor presents Johnsy's hopelessness and her acceptance of death as the primary obstacle to her recovery, but Johnsy nonetheless cannot shake her fatalistic insistence that she will die when the last leaf falls. Sue's attempts to cheer her up are unsuccessful, but when Mr. Behrman paints a realistic-looking leaf onto the wall outside Johnsy's window—tricking Johnsy into believing that one leaf has improbably survived a storm—Johnsy realizes that her attitude has been unacceptable, and she regains her health.

Sue – A young artist from Maine. She is very close to Johnsy, cooking for her, caring for her, and financially supporting her in her illness. When the doctor visits, Sue tells him firmly that Johnsy is not depressed because of a man and that Johnsy had always wanted to paint the Bay of Naples, suggesting her detailed knowledge of her friend's life and artistic ambitions. She tries unsuccessfully to bring Johnsy out of her depression. Throughout the story, Sue is working on a picture for a magazine story, using Behrman as a model, and plans to use the money she will earn to buy food and wine for Johnsy. After Johnsy recovers, Sue is the one to inform her that Behrman has died of pneumonia.

Behrman – An old and somewhat cantankerous artist who lives downstairs from Sue and Johnsy. He has been painting for four decades without any commercial success, but still hopes to paint what he calls his "masterpiece." He is an alcoholic and earns money by posing as a model for artists in the neighborhood. Despite his gruff exterior, he has a soft spot for Sue and Johnsy. He is initially dismissive of the idea that leaves on a vine could have anything to do with Johnsy's health, but ultimately goes outside on a cold and rainy night to paint a realistic-looking leaf onto the wall outside her window so that she will think one last leaf has miraculously survived the storm. As a result of this sacrifice, he catches pneumonia and dies—but Sue remarks that he had finally painted his masterpiece.

Doctor – A busy, older man with "shaggy grey eyebrows" who attends to Johnsy and Behrman. He diagnoses Johnsy with mental as well as physical illness, telling Sue that he cannot help a patient with medicine when she doesn't want to get better. He is skeptical of the idea that unfulfilled artistic ambitions might be the cause of Johnsy's depression, asking Sue whether she is depressed over a man. He visits Johnsy again after she has recovered and gives her a good prognosis, but tells Sue that Behrman is dying of pneumonia.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

HOPE AND HEALTH

Confined to her bed in the Greenwich Village apartment she shares with Sue, Johnsy (who is suffering from pneumonia) becomes preoccupied with a leaf on a vine outside her window. This leaf comes to symbolize her will to live; when the **last leaf** falls from the vine, she tells Sue, she will die. Their neighbor Mr. Behrman scoffs at the idea: "Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a confounded vine? I haf not heard of such a thing." Nevertheless, by painting the illusion of a "last leaf" on the wall outside Johnsy's window, he gives her hope again—a gift which saves Johnsy's life by reminding her that she still has a future.

The illusion of a leaf is able to keep Johnsy alive because "The Last Leaf" conflates physical and psychological illness. Though

the doctor diagnoses Johnsy with pneumonia, he asserts that her real problem is that she's lost the desire to live. He tells Sue that half of his medical work is useless if the patient herself doesn't want to get better, and Johnsy seems to no longer hope to regain her health or imagine a future for herself. Because of this, he urges Sue to give Johnsy hope by asking her about new winter clothes, since "if she were interested in the future, her chances would be better." Johnsy, though, insists that she is finished living and wants "to go sailing down, down, like one of those poor tired leaves," which shows the extent of her psychological ailment.

When Johnsy sees that the last leaf has seemingly survived the storm against all odds, however, she regains her sense of hopefulness about the future. "I've been a bad girl, Sudie," Johnsy says. "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was…it is a sin to want to die." Having come to the conclusion that she was wrong to lose hope, Johnsy sits up and begins to eat again, and the doctor pronounces her on the mend. Johnsy's recovery is inextricable from her rediscovery of her hope for her future. It's not winter clothes that excite her, as the doctor suggested, but the prospect of painting again: she tells Sue that she'd like to achieve her long-held dream of visiting Italy to paint the Bay of Naples.

Just as thoughts of her future paintings give Johnsy the hope to overcome her sickness, Behrman finds courage and hope for himself and his neighbors in the art he will someday create. "Some day I vill baint my masterpiece," he says," and ve shall all go away. Gott! yes." It's Behrman's masterpiece—the illusionistic painting of the last leaf outside Johnsy's window—that gives Johnsy hope. In a way, then, Behrman uses his art to transfer his own hope to Johnsy. Once Behrman has painted his masterpiece, thereby achieving his life's work, he himself succumbs to pneumonia. This suggests that he, unlike Johnsy, no longer believes his best work is in front of him. Since he has just painted his masterpiece—which reminded Johnsy of her desire to paint her own masterpiece—he no longer has the will to live.

O. Henry therefore suggests that physical health is strongly related to hope for the future. For the artists in "The Last Leaf," their hope for the future centers on fulfilling their life's purpose: painting a masterpiece. As the doctor suggests, though, hope can come from many sources—all that matters for restoring physical health is that a person looks forward to something.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

As young female artists in early twentieth-century New York, Sue and Johnsy are in an unusual position. Their behavior challenges accepted notions of women's roles and responsibilities in the period: rather than marrying and devoting their energies to the domestic sphere, they have chosen to move to New York and lead independent but financially precarious lives in pursuit of their art. After meeting at a restaurant and discovering their many shared interests, Sue and Johnsy decide to move in together. Confronted with the disapproval of the wider society, the two women find solace in their friendship.

The story's few men dismiss and belittle Sue and Johnsy. For example, the doctor who diagnoses Johnsy's pneumonia asserts that art is not "anything…worth thinking about" for a woman. When he asks if anything is bothering Johnsy, Sue replies that "she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples one day." The doctor doesn't believe that this unfulfilled aspiration could be the cause of Johnsy's depression—"Paint—bosh!" he replies, and asks if she is upset over a man. Sue, by contrast, contradicts the doctor's view that romantic troubles could be the only thing "worth thinking about" for Johnsy. "Is a man worth—" she begins, but cuts herself off, seeming to imply that a man wouldn't warrant such a depression. Even other artists who know Sue and Johnsy and seem to respect their work can be dismissive of them based on gender. Their neighbor, Mr. Behrman expresses some of the prevailing views of the time when he shouts "You are just like a woman!" at Sue, accusing her of irrationality and jumping to conclusions.

Some critics have advanced the view that Sue and Johnsy are romantically involved. At the very least, they clearly share a close intimacy that exists outside the more conventional roles for women in the period: they are unmarried, live together, and share a home life that does not involve men or caring for children. Sue seems very sure that Johnsy is not involved in a heterosexual relationship: "There is nothing of that kind," she tells the doctor. The two women call each other by various endearments including "dear," "Sudie," and "dear Johnsy." Sue is highly loyal to Johnsy, cooking and caring for her and telling her "I'd rather be here by you" when Johnsy asks her to leave. Sue is in despair at the prospect of Johnsy's death: "Think of me, if you won't think of yourself," she says. "What would I do?" O. Henry never conclusively confirms or denies the nature of their relationship, but it's clear that the two women are very close, and that they are able to support each other's ambitions and passions when others dismiss them.

"The Last Leaf" thus depicts two women who lead unconventional lives. Whether or not Johnsy and Sue are romantically involved, their decision to build a life together challenges prevailing gender norms, particularly the expectation that early twentieth-century women should devote all their time and efforts to their husband and children. By devoting themselves to each other and to art instead, Johnsy and Sue form a new, alternative model of a family and suggest that women's interests and abilities are far more varied than most men of the era could understand.

THE "STARVING ARTIST" AND THE "MASTERPIECE"

"The Last Leaf" is set in Greenwich Village, a bohemian neighborhood in New York City famous as a gathering place for writers and artists. Sue, Johnsy, and Behrman have moved to this neighborhood because it's cheap and vibrant, but poor conditions in the impoverished areas of the city in this period—which included overcrowding, cold weather, and lack of sanitation—meant that deadly illnesses could spread quickly. In the story, an outbreak of pneumonia makes Johnsy seriously ill and ultimately kills Behrman. Despite the adversities of poverty, alcoholism, and disease, however, all three characters have made the decision to accept these hardships in order to pursue their art and produce what Behrman calls a "masterpiece."

Sue, Johnsy, and Behrman attempt to make a living by painting, but can barely make ends meet. "I can sell the editor man [my picture], and buy port wine…and pork chops," Sue tells Johnsy, suggesting that food is hard to come by. Similarly, after decades of work as an artist, Behrman only makes a small income as an artist's model and has become an alcoholic. The narrator asserts that many other inhabitants of Greenwich Village share their predicament: indeed, he suggests that the neighborhood is a gathering place for artists not only because of the cheap rent, but because the winding, maze-like streets make it difficult for their creditors to find them. Thus, the story's three main characters are living the quintessential life of a starving artist.

These three characters weather adversity because they are committed to an artistic project, even if that project seems like a distant dream. Johnsy wants to paint the Bay of Naples, but her poverty and poor health make a trip to Italy seem implausible. Sue labors over a single painting throughout the story, working "through most of the night." Although Behrman is over sixty, he has had little success. He is obsessed with painting a single great picture—which he terms his "masterpiece"—but he hasn't started it yet. For each of these characters, the promise of eventual success keeps them going, and it's when Johnsy forgets her desire to paint the Bay of Naples that she loses her desire to live.

At the end of the story, Behrman does paint his "masterpiece"—the illusion of a leaf painted on the wall outside Johnsy's window. After he has completed this great work—the one he has struggled for all his life—Behrman succumbs to pneumonia, suggesting that the promise of a masterpiece had been his only motivating force. It's significant that he produced this masterpiece after decades of solitary struggle—it's ultimately his desire to help his neighbors inspires him to produce a great work of art. "The Last Leaf" suggests, then, that even starving artists rely on the social bonds of their neighborhood: Behrman models for Sue, he is inspired by Johnsy, and from Behrman's masterpiece Johnsy regains her will to live, primarily because she remembers her own desire to make great art. Painting a masterpiece is not simply a matter of technical accomplishment, then. Art, the narrator suggests, is a communal project.

FRIENDSHIP AND SACRIFICE

Ultimately, Behrman's "great masterpiece" is not a typical painting, but a single leaf he has painted onto the wall—a leaf so realistic that both Johnsy and Sue believe it is truly the **last leaf** on the vine. This masterpiece saves Johnsy's life by returning her will to live. Because he went outside in a storm to paint the leaf, however, Behrman catches pneumonia and dies. This sacrifice is not the only selfless act in the story: although the three protagonists have few possessions to call their own, they survive hardship by loving and caring for one another.

Although the characters in "The Last Leaf" lead difficult artistic lives, they find meaningful connections to others in Greenwich Village. Sue and Johnsy have left their families in Maine and California, but they meet in a restaurant on Eighth Street and form a new household together. The cantankerous old artist Behrman—who has lived alone for forty years—nevertheless feels a powerful love and responsibility for his neighbors: "[H]e regarded himself as especial mastiff-in-waiting to protect the two young artists in the studio above."

When Johnsy first becomes ill, she turns away from human companionship, which seems to equate social isolation with illness and death. Convinced that she is dying, Johnsy wants to be alone: "Couldn't you work in the other room?" she asks Sue "coldly." In response to Sue's desperate call to stay alive for her, Johnsy doesn't respond, lost in her own solitude and depression. "The lonesomest thing in the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious, far journey," observes the narrator. "One by one the ties that held her to friendship and to earth were loosed." Without her friendships, Johnsy would have succumbed to her own melancholy and died: it's Sue's attention and Behrman's act of kindness in painting the leaf that restore her to health.

The story may finally suggest that Behrman's "masterpiece" isn't a painting at all—rather, his culminating achievement is the sacrifice of his own life to save Johnsy. Ultimately, he finds inspiration not by painting alone in his "dark room," but by using his artistic gifts for the benefit of another person. Indeed, "The Last Leaf" suggests that artistic success, health, and even life depend on the social bonds of friendship that, in the narrator's words, "tie" people "to earth." Ultimately, Behrman's masterpiece is his gift for friendship.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE "LAST LEAF"

Johnsy, a young artist who is suffering from severe pneumonia, begins obsessively counting the leaves as they fall from a vine outside her window. When the **last leaf** falls, she tells her roommate Sue, she will die. Johnsy sees the last leaf as a symbol of her hold on life; when it falls to the ground she thinks that she too will "go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor tired leaves." By contrast, both Sue and their downstairs neighbor Mr. Behrman deny that the leaf has any symbolic value at all. "What have old ivy leaves to do with you getting well?" asks Sue with "magnificent scorn." Nonetheless, though, Behrman accepts that Johnsy identifies herself wholly with the leaf, and he goes out in the storm to paint an illusion of the last leaf on the wall, which restores Johnsy to health by reminding her that "it is a sin to want to die." Thus, the leaf represents Johnsy (since its trajectory is parallel to hers), and it also represents the effects of symbolism, since Behrman's purely symbolic gesture saves Johnsy's life. Significantly, Behrman is a failed artist who has tried all his life to paint a masterpiece, and Sue declares that the leaf he paints is his masterpiece. This suggests that the symbolic power of art is best when it is used to help others.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Random House edition of *The Best Short Stories of O. Henry* published in 1994.

The Last Leaf Quotes

One was from Maine; the other from California. They had met at the *table d'hote* of an Eighth Street "Delmonico's," and found their tastes in art, chicory salad and bishop sleeves so congenial that the joint studio resulted.

Related Characters: Sue, Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 308

Explanation and Analysis

Sue and Johnsy are young women artists who arrive in New York City as outsiders, having left their past lives behind in Maine and California, respectively. After meeting at Delmonico's, they decide to live and work together. This backstory explains that Sue and Johnsy formed a strong friendship because they have many overlapping interests (art, food, and fashion), and that they have chosen to build a life together based on those shared passions rather than more conventional obligations to a husband and children. Sue and Johnsy's relationship thus provides a different model for partnership and commitment than the traditional male-female coupling, whether or not they are romantically involved (as some critics have argued they are). Thus, "The Last Leaf" suggests that love and intimacy can find expression in many different configurations—not just in heterosexual romantic relationships, but also between friends, peers, and neighbors.

["]Your little lady has made up her mind that she's not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?"

"She—she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples some day," said Sue.

"Paint?–bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking about twice—a man for instance?"

Related Characters: Sue, Doctor (speaker), Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

The doctor's dismissive response to Johnsy's artistic ambitions ("Paint?–bosh!") is typical of attitudes towards women at the time. The doctor suggests that art is not a proper pursuit for women, and he is unwilling to believe that unfulfilled creative desires could be the cause of Johnsy's depression. Instead, he asks whether she is distressed over a man—which he sees as a more acceptable preoccupation for a woman—"worth thinking about twice," unlike art. His assumptions and judgments about Johnsy illustrate the prejudice single women often faced in the early twentieth century due to the prevailing attitude that a woman's life was not complete without a man. This is particularly significant in light of the fact that, throughout the story, Sue provides emotional, physical, and financial support to Johnsy—effectively serving the role traditionally reserved for a spouse. This suggests that O. Henry may have been commenting on the unequal treatment of women through his portrayal of Johnsy and Sue as women with ambitions and full emotional lives that have nothing to do with men.

["W]henever my patient begins to count the carriages in her funeral procession I subtract 50 per cent from the curative power of medicines. If you will get her to ask one question about the new winter styles in cloak sleeves I will promise you a one-in-five chance for her, instead of one in ten."

Related Characters: Doctor (speaker), Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309

Explanation and Analysis

O. Henry shows in the doctor's diagnosis that health and hope for the future are closely tied together. Since Johnsy is convinced she will die—in the doctor's words, she is beginning to "count the carriages in her funeral procession"—that belief becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. By telling Sue that the effectiveness of his medicine decreases by 50 percent when the patient is depressed, the doctor suggests that medicine cannot heal a psychological ailment. This insight proves to be true, since it's not until Johnsy changes her outlook that her health begins to improve. However, the doctor's sexist views continue to prevent him from fully understanding Johnsy or what motivates her, since he assumes that new clothes will give her hope for the future, while what she really wants is to travel and paint the Bay of Naples. The doctor's dismissal of Johnsy's aspirations and desires reminds readers that, as an unmarried female artist, she lives at odds with society's expectations of her. This rejection of her hopes as "bosh" is perhaps one reason why Johnsy's primary challenge in the story is hanging onto her hope, and her belief in the possibility of a fulfilling future for herself when faced with such prejudice.

After the doctor had gone Sue went into the workroom and cried a Japanese napkin to a pulp. Then she swaggered into Johnsy's room with her drawing board, whistling ragtime... She arranged her board and began a pen-and-ink drawing to illustrate a magazine story. Young artists must pave their way to Art by drawing pictures for magazine stories that young authors write to pave their way to Literature.

Related Characters: Sue

Related Themes:

Page Number: 309-310

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing the doctor's grim prognosis for Johnsy's chances of surviving pneumonia, Sue is clearly deeply emotionally affected. She is determined to hide her grief from Johnsy, however: she cries in the workroom but "swaggers" into the bedroom, "whistling ragtime." Sue's "swagger"—a description usually associated with men—demonstrates her self-assurance and defiance of gender norms: her confident entrance into Johnsy's room depicts her as a strong and independent woman who is cheerful in the face of adversity. Ragtime was a popular genre of jazz music which was also primarily associated with male musicians and performers, so Sue's whistling suggests her comfort with pursuing traditionally masculine interests and occupations. Her musical tastes are particularly illuminating in light of the fact that she is whistling ragtime as she prepares to draw a pen-and-ink illustration for a magazine story—another excursion into a male-dominated creative field. However, it's noteworthy that by taking on both the domestic labor of cooking and caring for Johnsy and the economic labor of earing their living, Sue assumes conventionally male as well as female roles in the household. O. Henry also uses this moment to comment on the plight of the "starving artist": Sue is drawing a picture which will accompany a magazine story written by a similarly struggling young writer. O. Henry was himself a writer of magazine stories. As he wryly observes, young writers and painters both deal with similar conditions of poverty and marginality as they struggle to find success in creative fields.

["]When the last one falls I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"
"Oh, I never heard of such nonsense," complained Sue, with magnificent scorn. "What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well?"

Related Characters: Sue, Joanna ("Johnsy") (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

The doctor diagnosed Johnsy with pneumonia, but he asserted that her real problem is that she doesn't want to

live. Johnsy's fixation on the leaves falling from an ivy vine outside her window proves his point. Counting the leaves as they fall, she adopts a fatalistic and depressed attitude, proclaiming that she will die when the last leaf falls. Sue makes a reasonable protest: ivy leaves don't have anything to do with Johnsy's health. Of course, in a logical sense, Sue is correct: there can be no medical explanation for a link between Johnsy's prognosis and the survival of the "last leaf" on the vine. But the point, O. Henry suggests, is that Johnsy believes there is a connection between ivy leaves and the ravages of pneumonia, and as long as she is convinced that she will die when the leaf falls, it seems that is exactly what will happen. Johnsy's obsession may be superstitious, but it has very real consequences for her medical condition. When she loses hope, her health deteriorates, suggesting that hope and health are closely interrelated—indeed, in Johnsy's case, O. Henry goes so far as to suggest that one cannot exist without the other.

❝ Behrman was a failure in art. Forty years he had wielded the brush without getting near enough to touch the hem of his Mistress's robe. He had been always about to paint a masterpiece, but had never yet begun it...He drank gin to excess, and still talked of his coming masterpiece.

Related Characters: Behrman

Related Themes:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

Behrman is described as a "failure in art" because after decades of painting he has never "touch[ed] the hem of his Mistress's robe." The mistress, in this case, is a reference to the figure of the Muse (traditionally personified as a woman) who would have inspired him to create a great work of art. Behrman has become an alcoholic, presumably as a result of his unhappiness, poverty, and the repeated disappointment he has faced in his creative endeavors. Therefore, through the character of Behrman, O. Henry seems to be commenting on the plight of the "starving artist." Behrman is an immigrant from an unspecified Eastern European country, and has labored for forty years in New York in poor living conditions without ever earning enough as an artist to make a decent living. In asserting that "he was always about to paint a masterpiece," O. Henry suggests that Behrman has never found the inspiration he needs. At the same time, however, the old artist "still talk[s] of his coming masterpiece," having never given up his dream of producing one great painting. O. Henry foregrounds Behrman's continuing efforts to create a masterpiece in order to set up the twist ending of "The Last Leaf," in which Behrman does indeed paint a single, exemplary work, having found the inspiration he was looking for in Johnsy. In this way, Behrman embodies the sense of hope that Johnsy so desperately needed in order to recover, while Johnsy herself becomes the Muse for whom Behrman had been waiting his entire life.

❝ "Is dere people in de world mit der foolishness to die because leafs dey drop off from a confounded vine? I haf not heard of such a thing. No, I will not bose as a model for your fool hermit-dunderhead. Vy do you allow dot silly business to come in der brain of her? Ach, dot poor leetle Miss Yohnsy."
"She is very ill and weak," said Sue, "and the fever has left her mind morbid and full of strange fancies. Very well, Mr. Behrman, if you do not care to pose for me you needn't. But I think you are a horrid old—old flibbertigibbet."
"You are just like a woman!" yelled Behrman. "Who said I will not bose? Go on. I come mit you. For half an hour I haf been trying to say dot I am ready to bose."

Related Characters: Sue, Behrman (speaker), Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

Leaving the sick Johnsy upstairs, Sue goes to visit their downstairs neighbor, Behrman, and asks him to pose for her illustration. When she tells him about Johnsy's "fancy" that she will die when the last leaf falls, Behrman is at first outraged, denouncing such "foolishness" in severe terms, calling her a "dunderhead," and even insulting Sue by saying "You are just like a woman." That Behrman's insult is about Sue's gender suggests the prejudice women continued to face in the period. Behrman's implication is that women tend to be irrational and jump to conclusions. However, the tenderness of his concern for "poor leetle Miss Yohnsy" belies the harshness of his tone. Like Sue, he recognizes that there is no actual correlation between Johnsy's health and the number of leaves on a vine. But as O. Henry has shown elsewhere in the story, hope and health are closely linked.

Sue recognizes that Johnsy's health problems are related to her psychological ailments, asserting that the fever has made her "morbid." After his initial fit of anger, Behrman reveals his underlying protectiveness and desire to help the women: after defiantly saying that "I will not bose," he quickly contradicts himself and agrees to come upstairs with Sue.

"Dear, dear!" said Sue, leaning her worn face down to the pillow, "think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"
But Johnsy did not answer. The lonesomest thing in all the world is a soul when it is making ready to go on its mysterious, far journey. The fancy seemed to possess her more strongly as one by one the ties that bound her to friendship and to earth were loosed.

Related Characters: Sue (speaker), Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 313

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story, Sue unsuccessfully tries to cheer up Johnsy. Finally, she desperately begs Johnsy to "think of me," asking how she would cope if Johnsy died. Her rhetorical question ("What would I do?") demonstrates the strength of her friendship and possible romantic attachment: Sue seems unable to imagine a future without Johnsy, suggesting just how closely their lives are intertwined. In response to this outburst, however, Johnsy is silent. Even as Sue reaffirms her love and devotion, Johnsy seems increasingly detached from the human relationships that once "bound her…to earth." Death is "lonesome," O. Henry suggests, since it involves the severing of friendship and family bonds. Johnsy's willful detachment and rejection of Sue's love is her way of preparing for the "far, mysterious journey" of death. In the story, attachment to others is strongly associated with life and health, and isolation with death and sickness. As she closes herself off to the social and emotional bonds of love and friendship, Johnsy's health suffers and she loses her will to live.

"I've been a bad girl, Sudie," said Johnsy. "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was. It is a sin to want to die. You may bring me a little broth now, and some milk with a little port in it, and—no, bring me a hand-minor first, and then pack some pillows about me, and I will sit up and watch you cook."
An hour later she said: "Sudie, some day I hope to paint the Bay of Naples."

Related Characters: Joanna ("Johnsy") (speaker), Sue

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 314

Explanation and Analysis

When Johnsy sees that the "last leaf" (which is in fact just an illusionistic painting of a leaf by Behrman) has seemingly survived the storm two nights in a row, she begins to hope that she too might beat the odds and recover. Since O. Henry has previously shown that health and hope are closely linked together in "The Last Leaf," this has an immediate positive effect on her physical health. Whereas before she had seen the last leaf as a symbol of her wavering hold on life, Johnsy now sees its survival as a reproach to her for giving up—and as a sign of her own capacity to withstand adversity. O. Henry again demonstrates the association of mental and physical health not only with hope, but also with friendship: after she sees that the leaf has survived the storm, Johnsy reaches out to Sue again, calling her to her bedside and addressing her by an intimate nickname ("Sudie"). Her request for food, pillows to sit up, a hand mirror to look at herself, and her comment that "I hope to paint the Bay of Naples" all suggest that she has begun to have hope for the future again, and her health improves accordingly.

The janitor found him on the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were wet through and icy cold. They couldn't imagine where he had been on such a dreadful night. And then they found a lantern, still lighted, and a ladder that had been dragged from its place and some scattered brushes, and a palette with green and yellow colors mixed on it, and—look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. Didn't you wonder why it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it's Behrman's masterpiece—he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell.

Related Characters: Sue (speaker), Behrman, Joanna ("Johnsy")

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 315

Explanation and Analysis

O. Henry's short stories are famous for their surprise endings, and "The Last Leaf" is no exception. Henry reveals at the end that all the leaves did fall from the vine in the storm, and the "last leaf" is not really a leaf at all but a *painting* of a leaf by Behrman (which explains why "it never fluttered or moved when the wind blew"). The illusionistic nature of the leaf proves that Sue and Behrman were right that the leaves had nothing to do with Johnsy's health: it was Johnsy herself who had to decide to get better. At the same time, however, the leaf becomes a symbol of a different kind. By painting the leaf, Behrman shows his love for his friend and willingness to trade his own life to save hers, allowing Johnsy to survive and re-kindle her relationship with Sue. His selfless act demonstrates the extraordinary capacity of human beings to love and make sacrifices for one another. In a sense, Behrman dies alone—trapped in his room, where no one thinks to look for him, he slowly freezes to death by himself. In another sense, however, he is not alone because he dies *for* someone. Having formed a profound connection with Sue and Johnsy, he makes the ultimate sacrifice in the service of their friendship. The extraordinarily realistic leaf painting is the artistic "masterpiece" Behrman had been striving for years to create, and he was only able to find the inspiration to make it when his friend most needed his help.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE LAST LEAF

"The Last Leaf" takes place in Greenwich Village, a bohemian neighborhood in New York City, sometime in the early 20th century. The narrator remarks that the labyrinthine, winding streets of the neighborhood make it an ideal home for artists, since debt collectors find the area difficult to navigate.

Greenwich Village is a haven for poor artists and bohemian young people, and O. Henry depicts a vibrant creative community. However, the "starving artist" existence has its costs, such as poor living conditions, shortage of food, and exposure to cold and sickness. It's also worth noting that Greenwich Village has historically been home to a large portion of New York's lesbian and gay population—a fact which becomes significant in light of Henry's implication that the two female protagonists may be romantically involved.

The story centers on Sue and Johnsy, two young women artists who met in a restaurant, discovered their shared tastes in art, and decided to live and work together. They share an inexpensive studio at the top of a run-down apartment building. When winter falls, a stranger named "Mr. Pneumonia" visits the neighborhood, and people begin to fall ill. Johnsy, too, becomes grievously ill with a case of pneumonia.

The basis of Sue and Johnsy's friendship is a shared interest in art: from the beginning, their relationship is inseparable from their creative interests. This backstory provides context for Sue and Johnsy's intense emotional attachment to one another, not simply because both women share an interest in art, but also because being unmarried female artists makes them both outsiders. That Henry characterizes pneumonia as a strange male visitor to the neighborhood perhaps helps to further establish men as an antagonistic presence in the lives of these two unusual women.

A doctor visits and tells Sue that Johnsy has a one in ten chance of living, and that her only chance is to "want to live," since depression can be as fatal as pneumonia. Without wanting to live, the doctor's medicine will have no effect and she won't regain her health. The doctor wonders if Johnsy is depressed about something in particular. Sue mentions her unfulfilled ambition to paint the Bay of Naples, but the doctor dismisses this and asks if Johnsy is depressed over a man. Sue tells him firmly that his suspicion is wrong, and there is no man in Johnsy's life.

The doctor's contemptuous response to Sue's suggestion that Johnsy might be depressed over frustrated artistic ambitions demonstrates prevailing attitudes about gender at the time: the doctor thinks that romantic troubles are worth a woman's concern, but art is not. The doctor's diagnosis also reveals a close linkage between hope and health; Johnsy won't live, he says, unless she decides she has something to look forward to. Sue's firm assurance that there is no man in Johnsy's life might suggest that she knows this because they are romantically involved, or simply that she knows Johnsy is focused on traveling and developing her talents as an artist, and not on marriage and children.

Sue sits by Johnsy's bedside working on an illustration for a magazine while Johnsy counts the leaves falling from the vine outside her window. When the **last leaf** falls to the ground, Johnsy asserts, she will die. Sue tells Johnsy that she's being silly and that the doctor has given her a good chance of recovery (which is a lie). She promises Johnsy that she will buy more food and wine after she sells the illustration, but Johnsy is unresponsive to Sue's attempts to cheer her up, and she asks Sue to draw in the other room. Johnsy says that she wants to "turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves."

Sue's work on the magazine establishes her economically precarious condition: she can only buy more food for Johnsy after she has sold the illustration, suggesting that money is short. Still, Sue plans to do everything possible to help Johnsy, which shows the strength of her attachment: she cooks, cleans and cares for her friend in her illness, while also acting as the primary breadwinner in their household. She knows how important it is that Johnsy not lose hope, so she conceals the news of the doctor's pessimistic prognosis. Despite all these efforts, however, Johnsy is increasingly cold to Sue, turning away from friendship as she psychologically prepares herself for death. Johnsy's desire to "go sailing down" like one of the leaves demonstrates her fading hope and her loss of the will to live.

Sue goes to visit their downstairs neighbor, an old, alcoholic, and unsuccessful artist named Behrman who earns a small income posing as a model for artists in Greenwich Village. Behrman, who has tried and failed his whole life to paint a masterpiece, is fiercely protective of Sue and Johnsy. When Sue tells Behrman about Johnsy's fixation on the **last leaf**, he is contemptuous of what he calls her "foolishness," but he agrees to come up to their studio to pose for Sue's illustration. While Johnsy sleeps, Sue and Behrman look solemnly at the ivy vine, and then Sue begins her work.

After decades of failure, Behrman is still trying to paint his "masterpiece." He is initially harsh to Sue, deriding Johnsy's "foolishness" for thinking that leaves could affect her health: like Sue, he points out that the falling of the leaves has nothing to do with whether or not Johnsy will recover. But his willingness to come upstairs and pose, as well as his obvious concern for Johnsy's welfare, prove that he in fact cares deeply about his upstairs neighbors. In this way, O. Henry suggests that underneath Behrman's gruff exterior—the product of a long, hard life of social alienation, economic struggle, and creative disappointment—he still has the capacity to connect with others. The significance of his long, solemn look at the ivy vine is only revealed later: perhaps Behrman had decided then to paint the illusion of a leaf on the wall outside her window.

There is a violent storm during the night. But in the morning, when Sue pulls up the shade covering their window, the **last leaf** is still clinging tenaciously to the vine. Johnsy was sure that it would have fallen during the night, but she says that it will fall today instead, and when it does she will go, too. Sue begs her to reconsider, but Johnsy is silent. The narrator notes how lonely it is to face death, and says that this depression possessed Johnsy increasingly as "one by one the ties that bound her to friendship and to earth were loosed."

When the last leaf (which has actually been painted onto the wall by Behrman) survives the night's storm, Johnsy is surprised, but states that it will surely fall during the day, a glum prediction that demonstrates her continuing depression. Even in the face of Sue's pleas, Johnsy is still convinced that the pneumonia will kill her, and seems determined to sever herself from human connection as a way of preparing for death. Paradoxically, this shows the strength of Johnsy's attachment to Sue: her attempts to dissolve the bonds of friendship before dying suggests that it is human intimacy which "binds" people to life.

After another night of wind and rain fails to shake **the last leaf** from the vine, Johnsy sits up and asks for soup and a mirror, remarking that "something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how wicked I was…it is a sin to want to die." A little later, Johnsy mentions her ambition to paint the Bay of Naples. The doctor visits and gives Johnsy a good prognosis ("even chances"), predicting that she will recover.

Johnsy finally sees the error of her ways: if the leaf that she had imagined as a symbol of her coming death can survive, then she can, too. Her statement that "it is a sin to want to die" has religious implications, suggesting that she may have found faith again along with hope. Her request for food and a mirror as well as her statement that she hopes to paint the Bay of Naples demonstrate that her hope has returned along with her health. The doctor's assessment of her vastly-improved odds of survival—"even chances," when before it was "one in ten"—links her improved medical prognosis to the redemptive hope given to her by the last leaf. This underscores one of the story's central messages: that hope and life are inextricably intertwined.

The doctor tells the women that he has to visit another patient—Behrman has caught pneumonia and needs to be taken to the hospital. The next day, Sue tells Johnsy that Behrman has died. The janitor found him sick in his room dressed in cold, wet clothes as though he'd been out in the storm. In his room, Behrman had a ladder and painting materials, which reveals that he had stayed out all night, painting the image of a leaf onto the wall so that Johnsy would think the **last leaf** had survived the storm. Finally, Sue remarks, Behrman has painted his masterpiece.

"The Last Leaf" ends with one of O. Henry's famous surprise endings: the "last leaf" is in fact a painting by Behrman. This seems to confirm what Sue and Behrman believed all along: that it wasn't the survival of the leaf that mattered, but the rekindling of Johnsy's hope. In a further twist, it is not Johnsy who dies, but Behrman. Despite the loneliness of Behrman's death, his sacrifice was not in vain. For, by referring to this selfless act of sacrifice as Behrman's "masterpiece," Sue is referring both to the quality of the painting—which is extraordinarily realistic—and to the love and generosity of the act itself, which had given Johnsy the will to live.

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